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AUTHOR Warner, Paul D.; Korsching, Peter F.
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ABSTRACT

By virtue of the Title V Rural Development Program, 10 paraprofessional workers were assigned, via Extension Services, to 10 counties in Appalachian Kentucky to engage in both action and research phases of community development. Extension specialists were provided to train and support the paraprofessionals in surveying local leadership, identifying problems, establishing objectives, organizing group action, and serving as linkage to outside resources. Evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses in the use of these paraprofessionals revealed that: (1) the dual role of extension worker and researcher may give the paraprofessional insights into the community, otherwise not apparent, but may also present problems via conflicting objectives; (2) supervision can be a problem relative to the level of the organizational structure from which it is administered and the amount administered, but it can also be an asset, providing the paraprofessional with a close tie to the action oriented agency; (3) while maintaining an indigenous status, the paraprofessional may not have certain insights afforded the professional, and his familiarity with the people may erode the necessary aura of confidentiality; and (4) use of the paraprofessional allows a higher degree of economic efficiency, but a high rate of turnover among paraprofessionals presents additional problems. (JC)

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THE USE OF PARAPROFESSIONALS AS AN APPROACH TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT*

Paul D. Warner
University of Kentucky

Peter F. Korsching
University of Kentucky

PAST EXPERIENCES IN THE USE OF PARAPROFESSIONALS

Historically, professionals in our society have expanded and expedited their impact through the use of paraprofessional assistants or aides. This concept has been broadly used in professions such as medicine, dentistry, dietetics, general business, social work, nursing, and education. The Cooperative Extension Service in recent years has put special emphasis on educational programs to reach low-income families. In doing so, many states have utilized paraprofessionals in programs of nutrition, urban youth, family living and as agricultural assistants.

The paraprofessional in attempting to reach low-income clientele is seen as a bridge from the middle-income institution to the low-income population. As Pearl and Riessman assert, "Indigenous staff are conceived of as 'bridge prople'; able to interpret community life and values to the professionals . . . as well as serve as interpreters of the professionals, and role models, for lower-income community persons (1965:77)."

The paraprofessional' ability to identify closely with the low-income individual's problems and feelings is considered the real strength in their use. And thus, to date, most experiences in the use of paraprofessionals have focused on problems primarily at the individual of family level. There has been much less use of paraprofessionals in attempting to solve community problems.

In Kentucky there have been two experiences in the use of paraprofessionals in community development. From 1969 to 1972 a

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pilot project called the Appalachian Community Impact Project (ACIP) was carried out in three counties of Southeast Kentucky. Based on a comparison of the 18 experimental with the 17 control communities after three years duration, Street (1973) concluded that significantly greater changes had occurred, both in terms of tangible projects and intangible individual development in those communities in which paraprofessionals were employed.

In 1972, seven counties used funds provided under the Emergency Employment Act to hire paraprofessional community workers in Northeastern Kentucky. These seven workers were successful in organizing a number of new community groups and worked closely with groups which had been previously organized. The accomplishments of these organized communities have included new industry, water systems, medical centers, low-cost housing projects, recreational areas, solid waste disposal systems, fire protection, clean-up campaigns, social activities, and leadership development.

Both of these two experiences at using paraprofessional community development workers have shown that local people can more effectively identify problems, set goals and work together for their common good in the presence of a catalyst such as a paraprofessional.

CURRENT TITLE V PROJECT

Area Description

A third opportunity for the utilization of paraprofessionals in community development has been made possible through the fundings of Title V of the Rural Development Act. This joint research-extension project purposes to stimulate the development of communities in Northeast Kentucky by employing paraprofessionals.

The geographic area for the project consists of ten counties located in the extreme eastern section of the state of Kentucky (Carter, Lawrence, Boyd, Elliott, Greenup, Martin, Magoffin, Pike, Floyd, and Johnson Counties). These counties, all of which are located in "Appalachia", have long been characterized by a variety of problems; including high unemployment, low per capita income, poor housing, a low level of educational attainment, poor transportation, inadequate health services, and a general lack of community facilities such as water, sewage, and solid waste disposal.

Physical characteristics of the area are generally those of hilly to mountainous. The topography of the region has served as a factor in the establishment of the social relationships of the inhabitants and the foundation of neighborhood groupings (Schwarzweller,

Brown, and Mangalam, 1971:20). Neighborhoods usually are composed of kin groupings. However, except for the kin groups, there are few regular gatherings where residents of neighborhoods come together. There are few organized neighborhood groups about which they feel pride or belonging, and thus there is little evidence of cooperation in common tasks for the good of the community. These families are brought together, to only a limited extent, by what Sorokin (1931:308) called their, ". . . general living, experiencing, and acting together."

However, as was predicted by Photiadis and Schwarzweller (1970: 63), the extra-familial structures are becoming more important in the lives of the residents of Appalachia. Increasingly, functions and tasks previously performed by the family now fall within the domain of the neighborhood and beyond. As a result, the individual will have to become more adept at working in groups, and communities will need to devise more effective means of coping with their problems.

It was from this context that the Title V project was envisioned and evntually came into being. The use of paraprofessionals was seen as an approach by which people in the communities could be stimulated to learn techniques of group organization and activity so that they could find solutions to common problems.

Program Philosophy

The philosophy in this community development program can be summarized in three main points:

1. The basic unit with which the development agent works is the neighborhood or community. The concept of community is central to the approach, though not pre-defined in either its structural composition or its geographical boundaries. The size and scope of any particular community is determined by the residents themselves, that is, any individual or institution that associates itself with the community is considered to be within the boundaries of the community.

2. Although development includes such concrete and tangible items as water lines, roads, and public parks, it also goes beyond this to include less tangible things; what Biddle and Biddle (1968:4) termed, ". . . social and personal change that moves toward consciously chosen goals."

3. The process of community development--the selection of goals, the methods for their attainment and the actual work accomplished toward those goals--is basically left to the residents of the community. The role of the paraprofessional and professional is not to do the work for the community, but to assist the community

in defining its problems, priorities and goals, planning a viable strategy for achieving these goals and giving technical assistance during the execution of the project. The role closely follows the prescription Taylor (1967:18) gives for the community development agent as a ". . . catalyst for local change and improvement. He (is) wise enough, however, not to attempt to dictate what the local community would do or should do."

Program Description

Ten paraprofessional workers, assigned one per county, were hired and are administered through the Cooperative Extension Service. They have responsibilities for both the action and research phases of the program. A research sociologist has responsibility for developing research instruments, interpretation of findings, determining program impact, and coordinating the data-gathering of the paraprofessionals. Training and support for the paraprofessionals in the areas of surveying local leadership, identifying problems, establishing objectives, organizing for group action, encouraging inter-community cooperation and serving as a linkage to outside resources are provided by county, area and state Extension community development specialists.

In the first eight months of the project, fourteen community development organizations were formed in communities that did not previously have such organizations. In nine of these communities a comprehensive survey of each household has been completed. In addition, the 10 paraprofessionals have assisted 30 other community organizations that had been organized before the start of this program. Actual projects completed or underway in the first eight months of the program include such accomplishments as: community centers, fire protection, community recreation, improvement of roads, solid waste disposal, flood control, community library, and water systems.

The Dual Role of the Paraprofessional

In the Kentucky Title V Rural Development Program, maximum effort bas been made to integrate the research and action-phases. Both are considered necessary for an effective development program, but in reality seldom are they designed to complement one another in a single project. The action portion focuses on the process of stimulating the development of the community while research provides the practitioner with information on problems and resources of the community, as well as being able to document overall program impact and effectiveness of the paraprofessional workers.

The integration of the research and extension functions is achieved by embodying both in the role of a single person. The

paraprofessional has responsibility for the community action program and data collection.

Within research, one of the first tasks the paraprofessional performs as he begins work in a new community is to administer a survey with a structured interview schedule of all households within the community. The primary purpose for the survey is to obtain benchmark data about the community before any development work is undertaken. However, as the paraprofessional is collecting the benchmark data, he is also performing two other functions which are necessary for the action component of the program. First, the paraprofessional becomes acquainted with the community. He learns about the people and problems within the community in a systematic and consistent manner by talking to the people and asking them about themselves, their families, and their community. Second, the paraprofessional collects data from which a community profile can be compiled to give a more comprehensive picture of the social, economic and demographic composition of the community. Once the survey is completed and the development work begins, the paraprofessional continues to meet the research needs of the program by providing information on the status of projects undertaken by the community in solving problems or meeting needs.

Although the paraprofessionals are hired as both researchers and extension workers, the main thrust of their work is on the action side as practioners in community development. After the basic community information has been collected through the house-to-house survey, the paraprofessional begins to work with the identified leaders in order to organize the community for group action. He assists community members in the identification of problems and needs, and in setting priorities. He encourages the community to establish objectives and to develop plans. He serves as a linkage between the local people and outside agencies and organizations that have resources needed by local groups. And, he encourages persons from the community to affiliate with other communities for exchange for ideas and accomplishment of broader objectives that require the cooperation of more than one community.

ASSETS AND LIABILITIES OF PARAPROFESSIONALS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The assets of indigenous paraprofessionals have already been well documented (Pearl and Riessman, 1965). Briefly, the advantages in the use of paraprofessionals have been found to be that:

1. They are peers of their clients.
2. They can serve as an acceptable model or significant example for their clients.

3. They are familiar with whatever subculture exists within the client group.
4. They know how to deal with problems from inside the social structure.
5. They can relate to the clients on an informal basis.
6. They can bridge the gap between the agency and the clients.
7. They are motivated by the personal satisfaction they receive from helping their own people.

However, there are some features which are unique within this and past community development programs in Eastern Kentucky using paraprofessionals that have brought to the foreground some new issues or have put a different slant on old issues. Discussion here will be limited to the issues which have arisen in these development projects.

1. Extension vs. Research Role

The paraprofessionals are hired to fulfill a dual research and extension role, however, as stated earlier, the main thrust of their work is in stimulating development of the community. This is reinforced by the fact that they are selected and hired by the extension service, their office is in the county extension office and their immediate supervisor is one of the agents within the county. This arrangement insures a high degree of success in the action phase of the program in that it provides the needed day-to-day support to the paraprofessional as he attempts to stimulate community organization and development.

Given the fact that the paraprofessional is operating within an organization in which accomplishment is measured primarily in terms of number of communities organized and projects carried through to completion, the research may be viewed as something that is not really necessary. There is a feeling that it must be gotten out of the way to get on with what is really important--organizing the community and stimulating development. This attitude concerning the research phase of the program can result in negligence and thus poor quality data.

On the other hand, researchers, in their quest for data, can overlook the fact that this is not like the ordinary research project. Normally, gathering data is a one-time proposition, and if the interviewer offends the respondent by soliciting information of a very personal nature, it is of little consequence. The most serious thing that can happen is the termination of the interview. However, if the paraprofessional offends one or more residents of small community which he is attempting to organize, it can adversely

affect any further work within that community. This is especially true if the offended residents are community leaders.

2. Supervision

The subject of supervision of paraprofessionals should not be taken lightly. Because of lack of previous experience of paraprofessionals as community development workers, substantial supervision is essential. In addition, the type of workers employed as paraprofessionals generally have previously experienced closely supervised work situations that have required low levels of individual initiative on the job.

Two different methods of supervision have been tried in the three Kentucky experiences. In one instance, a single person served as supervisor for six paraprofessionals in different counties. The second approach was that of designating a county agent in each county as the supervisor of the paraprofessional in that county. It was found that a single supervisor tended to feel more of a commitment to the program and was able to develop specialized skills in supervision. However, with paraprofessionals located in different counties the person could not have daily contact with each paraprofessional, and thus reduced his effectiveness. On the other hand, in the program with the supervising agent in each county, the agent was able to provide the needed day-to-day contact and counseling but often did not have a strong sense of commitment to the program given his other responsibilities as county extension agent.

The interest for the program shown by the supervising agent is, of course, of paramount impact. If the supervisor displays lack of interest or disdain for all or part of the program, the paraprofessional can easily catch this cue and react similarly.

3. Paraprofessional Status

In this program, the paraprofessionals are hired specifically to play a paraprofessional role. They are part of a team in which they accomplish the data gathering, organizational and maintenance tasks within the community, and are backstopped by professionals at the county, area, and state levels when the need arises. Because of their unique position they can relate to the community residents on an informal basis without fear of compromising their professional status or undermining the functioning of their organization. This is merely taking cognizance that the special value of the paraprofessional is actually derived:

> . . . from his non-professional status. This is not to imply that professionals are bad and that it would be better if all personnel were non-professionals, but

> rather that because professionals can do certain things, they are limited in doing others, and conversely some of the tasks of the non-professional preclude a professional relationship (Pearl and Riessman, 1968:196).

A negative aspect is that the years of extensive training the professionals have had gives them certain intuitive insights into situations which the paraprofessional only acquires after a considerable period of time. The paraprofessional can, of course, seek the aid of the professional, but this assumes that the paraprofessional recognizes the need of professional assistance, which he may not.

4. Indigenous Status

As mentioned earlier, the paraprofessionals serve as a "bridge" between the community development agency and its clients. Their effectiveness in this role derives from their familiarity with the client's culture. The paraprofessionals have what Rogers and Burdge (1972:367) would term the proper balance of heterophily and homophily between the change agent and the client. In the words of a local participant in the ACIP project:

> We know these folks (the paraprofessionals); they are some of us; they understand us and respect our ways of doing things. We don't take kindly to 'outsiders' coming in to tell us things--and, no offense, but you (the interviewers) are 'outsiders' too, we'd say. When we get to know you and you get to know us, it's all right; but until then we need someone we can trust to bring us together. That's why this program works while others don't (Street, 1973:115).

However, although this "insiders" knowledge and familiarity is extremely valuable, it can also lead them to overlook or disregard something which an outsider might recognize.

A further complication, which has not been explored by the literature but which appeared as a problem in this project, is that the same qualities of the paraprofessionals which were listed above as making him an effective "bridge" between professional and client, at the same time may limit his effectiveness. In administering the survey, respondents sometimes refuse to give certain kinds of information to paraprofessionals, though they would generally give the same information to a professional. It is felt that this is due to the threatening aspect of giving such information to a "neighbor" since he is from the same county and sometimes from the

same community. Furthermore, the informal paraprofessional style does not promote the same aura of confidentiality which the professional-client relationship promotes.

One other problem related to the paraprofessional's indigenous status has been observed. Those paraprofessionals who are particularly young in age experience some difficulty in working with the clients. Since most of the communities are relatively stable, community members have known these paraprofessionals for most of their lives and have watched them grow up. As such, the residents have difficulty in seeing these younger community members in the role of mature organizers and advisors.

5. Low Cost

The use of paraprofessionals can provide maximum return for a low-budget program. Many of the skills that the community development agent requires in his daily work routine with the community are of the type that can readily be transmitted to a paraprofessional with a moderate amount of training. Thus, the use of paraprofessionals is a method for expanding the scope of an existing development program at a relatively low cost. In the present program, the paraprofessionals are carrying out projects with the same degree of efficiency and success as would be expected of professionals, but at one-third of the cost. Stated another way, the use of paraprofessionals allowed for the expansion of the community development effort to approximately three times the magnitude which could be expected of a program with the same resources but using only professionals.

6. Turnover

Turnover of paraprofessional personnel has been a problem in all the community development projects in Eastern Kentucky (Duff, 1974:6). In a nine month period, the present program has had a 50 percent turnover. One reason for this high turnover is that the training the paraprofessionals receive as assistant development workers prepares them for many other occupations as well. When this is combined with the high degree of visibility within the county they have through this position, they became attractive candidates for potential employers who can offer higher salaries. Another possible reason for the high turnover is hasty initial selection of the paraprofessionals in order to get the program underway.

A third reason for the turnover is related to the nature of the funding. The program is funded through a special appropriation with a duration of three years. Therefore, all the positions created within the program are only temporary with no definite provision of

a career line into extension or some other system. Thus, the paraprofessionals display little reluctance in moving to a new position which promises somewhat better pay and greater security for the future.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Appalachian Community Impact Project and the project funded through the Emergency Employment Act have laid the foundation for the use of indigenous paraprofessionals in stimulating development in low-income communities. These two experiences in Eastern Kentucky have shown that paraprofessional community development workers can be effective agents in helping the local population identify problems, set goals, and organize for collective action toward those goals. The success achieved in these first two endeavors gave impetus for the creation of a plan using paraprofessionals in the current Title V program. In addition, the evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of those two programs provided the guidelines by which the current program was formulated.

This paper discusses some of the unique strengths and weaknesses in the use of paraprofessionals in these programs. The high degree of integration of extension and research which calls upon the paraprofessional to play a dual role gives the paraprofessional insights into the community which he might otherwise not have, but has caused problems in that the immediate objective of the two fields can be at variance with each other. Supervision can be a problem, particularly in relation to the level of the organizational structure from which it is administered and the amount of supervision necessary, but can be a distinct asset in actual development work because of the close tie of the paraprofessional to the action oriented agency. The indigenous status of the paraprofessional is, of course, his reason for existence in the program, but it can also have deleterious effects. The paraprofessional may not have certain insights that professionals have and his familiarity with the local populace can erode the aura of confidentiality which the paraprofessional-client relationship promotes. On the other hand, the paraprofessional's informal style certainly gives him an advantage in relating to the local community residents. Also, the use of paraprofessionals allows a much higher degree of economic efficiency for low budget programs. Finally, there is a high rate of turnover in paraprofessionals. This may be caused by attractiveness to other employers who are able to pay higher salaries, by poor or hasty initial selection of the paraprofessionals, and by lack of a definite career line into more permanent employment.

However, as long as the strengths are used to advantage and it is recognized that potential problems exist with necessary steps taken to correct them, or at least reduce their negative effects, the use of indigenous paraprofessionals for community development can be a successful approach as shown by the success of the two former Kentucky experiences and the progress being made in the current Title V program.

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